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ABSTRACT

Among nations throughout the world there is a need to share information about early childhood services. This information would allow a given country to examine its early childhood services in light of the systems developed by other nations. At present, comprehensive and detailed information about early childhood services in most countries around the world is not readily available in the United States. As a major step in collecting the general information needed, a cross-national study of early childhood education and care services, the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) Preprimary Project, is now being conducted. The High/Scope Educational Research Foundation serves as the international coordinating center for the Preprimary Project. In this report, a brief overview of the IEA Preprimary Project is followed by examples of data from official records and from families. Implications of the information for public policy and educational practices are discussed. Preliminary findings from family survey data from the People's Republic of China and Portugal are discussed. It is concluded that as the United States plans for future early childhood programs, information from other countries should be used to allow a wider examination of the major issues and potential solutions to problems. Such use may result in the most comprehensively based system of services possible for preprimary children. (RH)

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The International Perspective on Preprimary Education

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The International Perspective on Preprimary Education

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During the past year Americans and others around the world were able to watch on live television as a six-nation team embarked on a trek across the Antarctic, as San Francisco citizens struggled to cope only hours after an earthquake, and as the Berlin Wall "cracked" and then opened. Today, using facsimile machines, U.S. companies and individuals can in a matter of minutes exchange messages and documents with nearly every country in the world. There is no question that through technology, the world is becoming a smaller and smaller place, with the happenings in nearly every country almost instantly affecting citizens of other countries. Clearly, in a world shrinking as rapidly as this, accurate and timely information about events in countries other than our own is no longer a luxury; it is a necessity. As various countries begin to unite to coordinate their activities (as the European Economic Community has united, for example), their joint planning will need to be based on knowledge of the current realities in one another's countries.

The business and financial communities were among the first to recognize the necessity for and benefits of collecting and sharing information across nations. More recently--within the past 20 to 25 years--the formal education community has begun global information sharing. And now there is among nations throughout the world a need for sharing

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information about their early childhood services. This sharing of information can allow a given country to examine its early childhood services (including philosophy, goals, curriculum) in light of the systems developed by other nations. The broader perspective resulting from such an examination can only serve to enhance a nation's future planning of early childhood services.

At present, comprehensive and detailed information about early childhood services in most countries around the world is not readily available in the U.S. Certain limited information does exist, however. For example, a recent book by Tobin, Wu, and Davidson (1989) provided an in-depth picture of a single preschool in each of three countries--Japan, China, and the United States. The Council of Europe and the Organization for Economic and Cultural Development (OECD) have both published information about preschools in selected European countries, but these reports have not been widely disseminated outside of Europe. Also, the results of some international comparative research studies are beginning to appear in the U.S. literature. These studies, however, usually focus on a few specific classrooms and teachers and provide little general information about any single country's preschool system.

There is a need to begin to collect more general information from other nations about their early childhood services--information about the supply (i.e., the proportion of eligible children enrolled), the demand (i.e., the proportion of children/families needing early childhood services), the financing of services, the training of service personnel, and so on. As a major step in the much-needed general-information collection, a cross-national study of early childhood education and care services--the IEA Preprimary Project--is now being conducted. Countries participating in the study are collecting the following types of information:

- Information from the country's official records concerning early childhood services
- Information from a direct family survey concerning familial use of and satisfaction with early childhood services
- Information from observations in early childhood settings to document the "quality of life" for preprimary children in these settings
- Information from assessment of children during and after early childhood services to determine short- and long-term effects of various care and education settings

The first type of information, from official records, sets the stage for collecting the next three types of information--the three interrelated "phases" of the Preprimary Project. Of particular interest will be a comparison of the information obtained from official records and the information collected directly from families about their use of and satisfaction with early childhood services. With the family survey data (Phase 1), it will be possible to assess how effectively national policies have been translated into practice. The setting observation data (Phase 2) will allow a comparison between the quality standards officially established and the implementation of these standards. Finally, the child assessment data (Phase 3) will allow countries to examine their official policies and practices in light of the effects on children.

Today I will present examples from the first two types of information collected--data from official records and data from families--and discuss the implications of this information for public policy and practices. First, however, I will give a brief overview of the IEA Preprimary Project.

Overview of the IEA Preprimary Project

The IEA Preprimary Project is an ongoing international study investigating the nature, quality, and effects of the experiences of

children prior to formal schooling. Operating under the auspices of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), the study includes the following three phases:

Phase	Methodology
1. Assessment of the usage of child care and early education settings	Household survey of representative sample of families
2. Assessment of the quality of children's experiences in these care/education settings	Observation of settings and assessment of child status
3. Assessment of short-and long-term effects of different care/education settings.	Follow-up studies of children from different settings

IEA invited the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation to serve as the international coordinating center for all three phases of the Project. The countries participating in one or more phases of the IEA Preprimary Project include developed and developing countries, represent four continents, and include the following:

Belgium	Hungary	The Philippines
Spain	Portugal	Federal Republic of Germany
Kenya	Nigeria	People's Republic of China
Italy	Thailand	Republic of Korea
Poland	Indonesia	United States
Finland	Hong Kong	

By joint decision of the project directors in each participating country, the age-range of the children to be studied by the project is 3 1/2 to 4 1/2 years. In most participating countries, this age-range takes in the child's last full year before entry into a formal school environment; it is also the age-range for which there is the widest variety of early childhood care and education settings.

For each phase of the study, the participating countries follow a mutually agreed-upon basic international study plan that allows findings to be analyzed across nations as well as within individual countries. The

study plan includes the use of jointly developed instruments and adherence to jointly developed timelines for each phase.

Early Childhood Services: Information From Official Records

The first type of information collected in the IEA Preprimary Project consists of reports prepared by early childhood researchers in each participating country when it first joined the study. Each report documents the history, current status, and projected future of early childhood services in the country. These reports have recently been published in a book titled *How Nations Serve Young Children: Profiles of Child Care and Education in 14 Countries* (Olmsted & Weikart, 1989). The book presents a picture of diversity among the participating countries. In some countries nearly all 4-year-old children attend an early childhood program. For example, in Belgium over 98 percent of 4-year-old children are enrolled in half-day educational programs and in Hong Kong the comparable enrollment figure is 99 percent. In other countries a much smaller proportion of 4-year-olds are enrolled in early childhood services. For example, in Thailand it is estimated that 26 percent of 4-year-olds attend settings and in Portugal the comparable enrollment figure is 32 percent.

In discussing issues of the future, the early childhood researchers from every country serving fewer than 95 percent of 4-year-olds noted an **increase in the service provision** as a major need of the next decade. Each of these countries is facing a growing demand for services that is related to increasing employment rates for women, increasing numbers of single-parent families, and growing recognition of the later-life benefits of providing early childhood programs. Those countries providing services for nearly all their 4-year-old children cited an **increase in the quality of**

services as a major need. Increasing quality was generally linked to improving training of personnel, providing better facilities, and improving adult-child ratios.

Early Childhood Services: Information From the IEA Preprimary Family Survey

The second type of information collected by the IEA Preprimary Project was the focus of Phase 1 of the study. In each country, we located a representative sample of families and interviewed them to obtain information about their use of early childhood services. The strategy of collecting early childhood service information directly from families is not a common one; most other studies have gone directly to care providers and teachers for such information. By interviewing families, the Preprimary Project encompasses even the most informal child care settings, those that would be missed by a study interviewing only providers and teachers. Furthermore, the family interview strategy documents parents' uses of multiple care and education settings, thereby giving an unprecedented total picture of care and education for each child studied. The strategy provides much-needed information about the various combinations of settings experienced by children, the proportions of their time children spend in these settings, and the time children spend traveling between settings.

All participating countries finished collecting the family survey data in summer 1989 and are currently processing and analyzing these data. Today I will present some preliminary findings from two countries, the People's Republic of China and Portugal.

People's Republic of China

In the book *Preschool in Three Cultures*, (Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989), Tobin and his associates present a detailed picture of a preschool in China.

The authors report that in this school 75 percent of the children attend only during the day, while 25 percent are boarding students. They go on to say that 5 percent of preschool children in China attend boarding preschools, with such programs being much more common in urban areas than in rural areas. This provides information about (1) attendance at this particular school and (2) the percentage of China's children attending boarding preschools, but it provides little information about the frequency with which parents utilize all the various types of early childhood care and education settings available for 4-year-olds in China.

In the family survey phase of the IEA Preprimary Project in China, data collectors in 10 provinces interviewed 12,720 families who had 4-year-olds (Shi & Xiang, 1989). In the preliminary analysis, the data have been analyzed separately for urban areas and for rural areas. The preliminary results provide a comprehensive picture of the types of early childhood care and education settings used for 4-year-old children across the 10 provinces. In urban areas, 87 percent of 4-year-olds are in extraparental care for several hours during a typical week, while in rural areas, 30 percent of children this age are in extraparental care for several hours during a week. Of all children in extraparental settings in both urban and rural areas, approximately 85 percent are in organized group settings and 15 percent are in individual settings. The Preprimary Project's preliminary results for attendance of 4-year-olds at boarding preschools are in general agreement with the findings reported by Tobin and his associates. That is, in urban areas, the Preprimary Project found that approximately 2 percent of 4-year-olds were attending boarding preschools, while in rural areas the percentage attending was almost negligible (0.01%).

One fascinating finding from the Preprimary Project family survey

concerns a practice common in the rural areas of China. When follow-up questions were asked of parents who responded that only familial care was used (i.e., parental care in the workplace or home), 32 percent of parents reported that during a typical day their 4-year-old children were left without adult supervision for several hours. These young children usually spent the time playing outdoors while the parents were working away from the home. This practice is considered safe in these rural areas where there are few of the dangers present in more industrialized countries (e.g., traffic).

Portugal

In Portugal, the Preprimary Project researchers found that 71 percent of 4-year-old children were cared for in at least one extraparental setting, and one in four of the children in that age-range participated in more than one setting (Bairrao, Lima, & Barbosa, 1989). I should explain here that it was jointly decided by the Preprimary Project countries to collect information about the child's participation in all early childhood care and education arrangements other than care by the parents (or guardians). Using this guideline, countries collected data about care by any relative, including older siblings and grandparents, but only if the parents/guardians were not present at the time of care. In Portugal, the most frequently used informal care setting was care by the child's grandmother--an arrangement used weekly by 35 percent of the families interviewed.

As reported earlier, the official records in Portugal indicate that early childhood education programs (formal services) are available for 32 percent of 4-year-old children. The results of the Preprimary Project family survey indicated that approximately 31 percent of children attend an educational program, a finding very similar to the "official" percentage reported. When parents were asked what type of early childhood setting they

would desire, 81 percent indicated that a formal educational setting would be their first choice.

Implications for Public Policy and Practice

The Preprimary Project's national findings (such as China's and Portugal's) and the cross-national findings that these will be a part of have potential policy and practice implications. Each participating country will be able to view its national data within the context of the broader, international findings. For example, while a participating country might use its national data to assess how its desired supply rates compare with its actual supply rates, it might also use the international data to study relationships between supply rates and funding structures in various national systems of care and education. This latter information might then suggest future directions to take in funding the country's preprimary programs.

The People's Republic of China (Xiang, 1988) provides a good example of how the Preprimary Project's family survey data will be used. In 1987 the planning activities for PRC early childhood care and education were decentralized, with principal responsibility for these programs shifting from the State Education Commission to committees at the provincial level. Under the revised system, each province must first consider its geographic conditions (terrain, distance between towns) and the characteristics of the families living in the province and then develop the most appropriate programs. For individual provinces, this newly acquired planning function requires up-to-date information to base their preprimary plans on. The 10 provinces participating in the IEA Preprimary Project are depending on project data for this information. Guizhou Province, for example, which has project data from a sample of 2,600 preschool children and their families,

intends to use its data in developing a provincial preprimary education plan.

Portugal (Bairrao, 1988) provides another example of the public policy uses of Preprimary Project findings. Today in Portugal, approximately 30 percent of preschool-aged children are being served by early childhood programs. Recently, about the time that Portugal joined the European Economic Community, the Ministry of Education issued an Educational Development Program for 1988-93. Under this program, the preschool coverage rates targeted for 1993 are 90 percent for 5-year-olds and 50 percent for 3- and 4-year-olds. To meet the 1993 objective, Portugal will need large investments of human and other resources, as well as information to use in the planning and implementation. Examining the Preprimary Project family survey findings about Portuguese families' service needs and usage patterns is viewed as an important first step in this planning and implementation process. It is hoped that project data coming from the various regions of Portugal will clarify the regional differences that must be considered in building a new and expanded early childhood care and education system.

Conclusion

Today, early childhood programs operate in nations throughout the world. As the U.S. plans for future early childhood programs, information from other countries should be utilized in this process; this would allow for a wider examination of the major issues, a more thorough consideration of potential solutions to current problems, and result in the most comprehensively-based system of services possible for preprimary children.

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